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ABSTRACT

This study examined associations between children's and mothers' perceptions of their relationships and children's biased appraisals of hypothetical negative divorce events. Such appraisals have been found to predict children's psychological adjustment. Subjects were 38 custodial, divorced mothers who had not remarried, and their children, of 8 to 12 years of age. There was a significant correlation between children's scores on a scale of negative cognitive errors and their reports of their mothers as rejecting, as providing less support than other mothers, and as unavailable to give support. Children's scores also correlated with mothers' reports of increased inconsistency about discipline. Children's scores on a scale that measured positive illusions (high self-regard, the illusion of personal control, and optimism for the future) correlated significantly with their reports of their mothers as being supportive of their problems and their feelings, and as providing support. Again, scores also correlated with mothers' reports of being inconsistent about discipline. Results suggest that an unsupportive and rejecting mother-child relationship may contribute to children's negatively biased appraisals of stressful divorce-related events, and that a supportive mother-child relationship may give a child the security to appraise divorce stressors in a more adaptive and less threatening manner. Appended are eight references. (Author/GLR)

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The Mother-Child Relationship and Children's Appraisals of Negative Divorce Events

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ABSTRACT

This study examined associations between children's and mothers' perceptions of their relationship and children's biased appraisals of hypothetical negative divorce events, which have been found previously to predict children's psychological adjustment. Subjects were 38 custodial mothers and their children ages 8 to 12 years who had experienced parental divorce within the previous two years. Children's scores on a scale of negative cognitive errors (catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, and personalizing) correlated significantly with their reports of their mothers as rejecting, as providing less support, and as unavailable to give support, and with mothers' reports of themselves as inconsistent about discipline. Children's scores on a scale measuring positive illusions (high self-regard, illusion of personal control, and optimism for the future) correlated significantly with their reports of their mothers as supportive of both their problems and their feelings, as providing support, and with mothers' reports of being inconsistent about discipline. Results suggest that an unsupportive and rejecting mother-child relationship is a possible contributor to children's negatively biased appraisals of stressful divorce-related events. Also, a supportive mother-child relationship may give a child the security to appraise divorce stressors in a more adaptive and less threatening manner.

BACKGROUND

Following parental divorce, some children will experience psychological adjustment problems (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington, 1989). One way of understanding these individual differences in adjustment is to examine children's appraisals about frequent and undesirable divorce-related events. Previous analyses have shown that in response to hypothetical situations depicting frequent and undesirable divorce events, children's scores on a scale of negative cognitive errors (catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, and personalizing) are significantly associated with symptoms of anxiety, low-self esteem, and maternal reports of child behavior problems. Children's scores on a scale of positive illusions (high self-regard, illusion of personal control and optimism for the future) are significantly associated with less self-reported aggression (Mazur, Wolchik, & Sandler, under review).

Although the investigation of appraisal biases holds great promise for understanding the differential effects of divorce, it is unclear how appraisals are acquired. Many attachment theorists postulate that social adaptation derives from a secure parent-child attachment bond. Thus, it is hypothesized that the support perceived within the mother-child relationship is associated with children's appraisals of stressful divorce events. Because characteristics of the reporter may account for associations between children's reports of their appraisals and perceptions of parental behavior, we obtained both mother and child reports of maternal behavior.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Subjects were 38 custodial nonremarried mothers and children ages 8 to 12 who had experienced parental divorce within the previous 24 months. The 19 girls and 19 boys were participants in a preventive intervention program for children of divorced parents, and were recruited by random sampling of petitions for marriage dissolution. Letters and follow-up phone calls describing the intervention program were used to recruit participants. In families where there was more than one child within the 8 to 12 year age range, one child was randomly selected to ensure independence of response.

The average time since the parents had divorced was 9.4 months (range 1 to 23 months). The average age of the children at the time of the interview was 10 years 1 month (range 8 years 3 months to 12 years 3 months). Mothers reported a median annual income of $25,000 for their families (range: less than $5,000 to $45,000-$50,000). Legal custody arrangements were 66% maternal custody and 34% joint custody, and all children lived at least half time with their mother. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of the children were Caucasian, and 11% were Hispanic.

PROCEDURE

One child from each family was interviewed at home, during which time the mother completed questionnaires in a separate room. All interviews were conducted as pre-tests to evaluate the efficacy of the prevention program.

MEASURES

CHILD REPORTS

1. Children's Cognitions about Divorce Scale (Mazur et al., under review): Comprised of 10 short descriptions of hypothetical events (see example below) that were selected from a group of representative divorce-related events previously rated as frequent and moderately to highly stressful (Sandler et al., 1986). Each description of an event was followed by 3 to 4 statements that reflected two negative cognitive errors and one or two positive illusions. The scale reflecting **negative cognitive errors** was comprised of 12 statements reflecting catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, and personalizing. The scale of **positive illusions** was comprised of 13 statements reflecting high self-regard, the illusion of personal control, and optimism about the future.
2. Child Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (Schaefer, 1965):
   a. Acceptance and Rejection subscales combined into 1 scale
   b. Inconsistent Discipline subscale
3. Social support from Mother:
   a. Perceived support for their feelings
   b. Perceived support for their problems
   c. Enacted support (Furman & Burhmester, 1985):
      "How much does your mom..."
   d. Perceived availability of support (Furman & Burhmester, 1985):
      "You can count on your mom..."
   e. Satisfaction with support (Wolchik et al., 1989):
      "How satisfied were you..."

MOTHER REPORTS

4. Child Report of Parental Behavior Inventory, Parent Version (adapted from Schaefer, 1965)

   a. Acceptance and Rejection subscales combined into 1 scale

   b. Inconsistent Discipline subscale

NEGATIVE COGNITIVE ERRORS

CATASTROPHIZING

ALL THE KIDS AT SCHOOL WILL LAUGH AT ME FOR HAVING TO WEAR THESE OLD CLOTHES.

OVERGENERALIZING

DAD WILL ALWAYS FORGET ABOUT WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO ME.

PERSONALIZING

IT'S MY FAULT THAT MY PARENTS ARE FIGHTING.

POSITIVE ILLUSIONS

HIGH SELF-REGARD

I KNOW MY MOM LOVES ME WHETHER OR NOT SHE CAN COME TO MY GAMES.

PERSONAL CONTROL

IF I CALL MY FATHER AND TELL HIM THAT I MISS HIM, THEN HE'LL COME TO SEE ME.

OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE

SOMEDAY MY PARENTS WON'T FIGHT ANYMORE.

CHILDREN'S COGNITIONS ABOUT DIVORCE SCALE

10 Hypothetical Events (2 of each):

Parental Distress
Parental Arguments
Criticism of One Parent By Other
Loss of Time With Each Parent
Noncustodial Father Misses Visits

Your mom complains to you that your father cannot be trusted.

1. *You think, "My parents won't always be so mad at each other." (Opt.)*

   This thought is:

   Almost exactly like I would think 1

   A lot like I would think 2

   Somewhat like I would think 3

   Only a little like I would think 4

   Not at all like I would think 5

2. *You think, "Everything is ruined." (Cat.)*

   This thought is:

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Children's scores on the scale of **negative cognitive errors** for divorce events correlated significantly with their perceptions of their mothers as more rejecting/less accepting (r = .40, p < .01), as providing less enacted support (r = -.31, p < .05), and as less available to give support (r = -.53, p < .001). The association between children's negative cognitive errors and their perceptions of their mothers as less supportive of their feelings nearly reached significance, r = -.27, p < .06. The association between children's scores on the scale of negative cognitive errors and mothers' reports of greater inconsistency about discipline were significant, r = .41, p < .01, and that between negative errors and mothers' reports of greater rejection of their child nearly reached significance, r = .27, p < .06. These results suggest that an unsupportive and rejecting mother-child relationship is a possible contributor to children's negatively biased appraisals of divorce-related events. Alternately, it is possible that children with high levels of depressogenic assumptions are more passive about their need for social support, leading mothers to attend to them less.

2. Children's scores on the scale of **positive illusions** for divorce events correlated significantly with children's perceptions of their mothers as more supportive of both their problems (r = .29, p < .05) and their feelings (r = .48, p < .001), as providing more support (r = .28, p < .05), and, surprisingly, with mother's reports of being inconsistent about discipline (r = .31, p < .05). These results suggest that a supportive mother-child relationship may give a child the security to appraise divorce stressors as less threatening. Also, as Taylor (1983) theorizes, illusions may be self-fulfilling, providing children the motivation and confidence to seek and receive social support.

3. Taken together, these results suggest that children may show tendencies to be be biased in their appraisals of negative divorce events, depending on the emotional availability of the custodial mother. It must be considered that these characteristics of the mother-child relationship may predate the parental divorce, perhaps becoming more accentuated during the transition to a single-parent household. The next step for researchers interested in prevention is to assess the mechanisms of change and of continuity: To increase children's divorce adjustment, how much would an intervention program need to depend on altering children's and mothers' representations of their relationship and how much on altering the manner in which mothers provide support and acceptance to their children?

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